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A short history of the Torossian debate

TANER AKÇAM

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Sarkis Torossian, an Ottoman Armenian, was an officer in the Ottoman army who fought on different fronts during the First World War. Because of his courage and success during the Gallipoli War, his military rank was raised and he was awarded a medal with an accompanying letter, signed by Enver Pasha himself. After learning that his family had been deported and exterminated during the genocide, Torossian switched sides and fought against the Turkish army. After 1920, he settled in the US where he published his memoirs in 1947. The translation of his memoirs into Turkish in 2012 has launched a heated debate. That an Armenian soldier was on active duty in Gallipoli, which has a crucial symbolic value for Turkish national identity, was unacceptable. His memoirs represent a total discrediting of the Turkish historical narrative on Armenians and the Armenian Genocide. Hence, some scholars have questioned its authenticity, denouncing him a charlatan and his memoirs as fiction. Others believe in the memoirs' authenticity despite the few errors and exaggerations, which are normal in such documents. This article argues that the debate is about the relationship between history, truth and memoirs.

Introduction

Sarkis Torossian was an Armenian officer in the Ottoman army, serving first as a lieutenant and later as a captain. His memoirs were published in the United States in 1947.[1] Professor Ayhan Aktar, who came across the book, recommended its translation into Turkish and had it published in August 2012. In addition, Aktar wrote an eighty-three-page introduction to the Turkish edition, added another eighty-six footnotes to the text and provided other information verifying the authenticity of Captain Torossian's account—despite the author's occasional factual errors.[2]

The work's appearance in Turkish was met with great interest—and consternation—and debates about its accuracy continued for a full year after its publication. Between September and October 2012, three different Turkish television channels held discussion panels on the work. On a programme called 'Old Notebooks' (*Eski Defterler*) the book's merits, the authenticity of its narrative and the accuracy of the events described were debated for a full two and a half hours. In August 2012 alone, eight different book reviews appeared in the Turkish daily press.[3]

It goes without saying that the principal reason these memoirs were met with such great and protracted interest is that their author was an Ottoman Armenian, and not just any Armenian, but one who fought as an artillery officer in the Ottoman army. Captain Torossian was highly decorated as well, having received

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medals and citations in recognition of his bravery during the war. This is not something that the Turkish public is used to hearing.

The decades of systematic propaganda in Turkey have almost uniformly portrayed the Ottoman Empire's Armenian population as 'traitors' who 'rebelled against the state' and 'stabbed the Turks in the back' during the First World War. It would not be off base to say that the entire Turkish population has been subject to 'anti-Armenian indoctrination'. Against such a backdrop, the notion of a brave and patriotic Armenian soldier of the empire came as a complete shock.

The lengthy and heated debates lasted nearly a year. Almost eighty articles and columns appeared on the subject, including four in English by the well-known journalist of *The Independent*, Robert Fisk. Even more remarkably, Hakan Erdem, a history professor at Istanbul's Sabancı University, wrote a 382-page book, *Between truth and fiction: the strange story of Torossian* (December 2012),[4] the purpose of which was to discredit Torossian's account as a complete fabrication.

After the heated debates subsided, the subject continued to draw the attention of the academic world, and it still does.[5] Scientific papers on the Torossian debates were presented during various conferences, and new studies on the subject of Christian soldiers in the Ottoman army, which were inspired by these debates, were published.[6] A conference entitled 'On truth and memoirs: the case of an Armenian soldier in the Ottoman army' was organized by the Clark University Strassler Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies between 17 and 19 April 2014. The main topic of the conference was how to interpret memoirs and the issue of forged documents.[7]

I entered into the debate as an individual after it had been going on for quite some time. As I will describe at length below, the debate was initially focused on the battles around Gallipoli, which was a part of the Torossian memoir that comprised roughly twenty-five of the book's 230 pages. It had become, for all intents and purposes, a debate around military history. It revolved around topics such as whether a hill or ship had been correctly identified or whether a ship had sunk on the date stated. The fact that 200 pages of the memoir were being ignored and that everyone seemed to have forgotten that Torossian wrote it as an Armenian ended up being the factor that dragged me into the debate.

The presence of factual errors in the memoir did not overly concern me during the debate. As a historian who has read hundreds of memoirs, I know that the presence of factual errors in memoirs is a common occurrence. Two issues were of prime importance to me. First, Torossian was an Armenian, and an Armenian had written his memories of battle while in the Ottoman army. One cannot consider this historical period without taking into account what happened to the Armenians during that time. Besides, the fate of Armenians constituted a key element of the memoir. The second issue was the question of what the relationship is between what historians accept as historical truth and what is recounted as truth in memoirs. The purpose of this article is to provide a broad summary of the debates around Torossian.

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Torossian's life story

According to the author's own account, he was born in 1893 in the town of Develi (Everek), today a city in Turkey's province of Kayseri. He had three brothers and one sister. His brothers, Mardiros, Parseh and Aram, went to America to work before the First World War. Sarkis, by contrast, attended cadet school and graduated from the Imperial Military Academy and later from the Artillery School in 1914, and received a commission to the artillery with the rank of lieutenant. He was appointed as an artillery officer to the *Ertuğrul* Battery (Fort No. 1 in British war accounts) during the defence of the Dardanelles. First, Lieutenant Torossian played an active role in the fighting against the allied fleet. He claims that the *Ertuğrul* Battery sank a British battleship under his command on 19 February 1915. He was wounded twice, first on 25 February and later on 18 March and, while recovering from his injuries, he was promoted to the rank of captain by Enver Pasha, then minister of war, on the grounds of bravery displayed in combat.

In the wake of the decree in April that demanded the disarming of Armenian soldiers serving within the Ottoman military, he was removed from his post and sent to Istanbul where it was said that Enver wished to meet him personally. Although he was mistakenly detained and briefly held in the dungeon of the Ottoman Ministry of War, he was eventually told that he would not be placed in one of the labour battalions, like other Armenian soldiers, but would instead remain in a combat unit. As a result, he was appointed as an artillery officer to the 8th Infantry Division, Field Artillery Regiment, where he once again participated in combat, this time in land operations.

Returning to Istanbul at the beginning of 1916, he was greeted with the news that his family had been deported. He thus appealed to both the Interior and War Ministries to have them returned to Develi, relying on the governmental decision that families of soldiers would not be subject to the 1915 Deportation Law. However, he claimed that all his efforts were for naught and expressed his belief that they were all killed.

Torossian's next assignment was in Romania, where he was appointed to the 46th Artillery Regiment. In September 1916, he fought against French and Greek units on the Macedonian front, and in November of that year he found himself battling Romanian troops, during which time he was once again wounded in the head. He nevertheless remained in active service, being actively involved in the fall of Bucharest on 5 December 1916. For his outstanding service in these battles he was decorated by the German, Austrian and Bulgarian military authorities.

In May 1917, Captain Sarkis Torossian was sent to the Arab front in what is now Iraq. He participated in the fighting against the British and was wounded once again. On Christmas Day of 1917, while in the north-east Syrian village of Tell Halaf (near Ras al-'Ayn), he unexpectedly encountered his sister and learned from her that their parents had been killed. Before he returned to the front, he entrusted his sister to an Armenian family in Aleppo. By now, his

thoughts were concentrated on desertion from the Ottoman army and revenge for his family's murder.

In August 1918, he made contact with Arab rebels and in the following month, on 19 September, he switched sides during the Battle of Megiddo. He now found himself in the ranks of the Arab rebel horsemen fighting the Turks. He claims at this time to have commanded a thousand-man unit of Arab cavalry and to have participated in the conquest of Syria. In November, he made contact with the Armenian Legion and it was here that he succeeded in reuniting with his brothers Parseh and Aram, who had returned from the United States and joined up with the Legion. The three brothers travelled together to Aleppo to see their sister, but upon arrival they learned that she had died.

Torossian and his brothers now went to southern Anatolia (Cilicia) to fight with the Armenian Legion, where they struggled until March 1920, when Sarkis left his command and formed an independent guerrilla unit. By his own description, he was 'going to fight and kill to the very last ounce of his ability', but shortly thereafter he claims to have 'grown weary from the desire for vengeance'.[8] By this time, his brothers had decided to return to the United States.

The detailed information—even down to the hour and minute—regarding his time on the various battlefronts is fascinating and provides one basis for determining the authenticity of his account. Among the illustrations in the book are two detailed, hand-drawn maps that Torossian provides of the naval attack of allied forces in Gallipoli and the defeat of the Ottoman army on Palestine fronts, along with a number of drawings and sketches of different places on the Palestine front, including Bulgaria, Romania, Iraq, Palestine and Cilicia.

The first debate: Gallipoli

After the initial wave of excitement and interest over the memoirs died down, a more serious debate began in the Turkish media lasting for nearly a year. At first, the debate focused on the question of whether the author's account of Gallipoli was accurate and, as such, remained largely limited to questions of military history.

The tenor of the first debate can be divided into two categories. The first concerns the objections of nationalist circles. Since the warfront in Çanakkale, commonly known in the West as the battles of Gallipoli, holds such an important place in the writing of Turkish history, the idea of an Armenian fighting gallantly there is totally unacceptable for nationalists. Thus, these circles responded as expected, dismissing Torossian's book as simply 'the most recent ploy of the Armenian diaspora' to discredit Turkey and to discount the suffering of its people. In their minds, it was no coincidence that the book was appearing now, just before the centennial of the Armenian deportations. It seemed obvious to them that this was a renewed attempt to gain support for Armenian genocide claims. The information contained within the author's memoirs was thus labelled as 'fabrications' (*uydurma*), 'deceitfulness' (*düzmece*) and 'the product of a [vivid] imagination' (*hayal mahsulü*).[9] Nor were the responses limited to those of historians. Even

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the Office of the Turkish Chief of Staff felt obliged to deny 'that there was ever an officer at the battle of Gallipoli by the name of Sarkis Torossian'.[10]

A second category of critique came from two historians from the aforementioned Sabancı University. Halil Berktay,[11] a colleague in the same department as the aforementioned Hakan Erdem, argued along the same lines, i.e. that the Torossian book 'was a complete fabrication; [and] that it didn't contain the slightest grain of truth that might be employed by historians'.[12] In Berktay's opinion, Torossian was not just 'some "Armenian" who was "a victim of the genocide"'. Rather, he was most likely a person who 'had hoped to gain some fame in his later years and earn a little money as well'.[13] He had 'gathered together some printed sources and written a novel'.[14]

Altogether, Berktay, who also writes a column for the Turkish daily *Taraf*, devoted a full thirty-four of his columns to the subject. The first thirteen of these columns appeared before 24 November 2012, the date that I first entered the discussion. Berktay began this first series by informing his readers that his grandfather, the late Halil Namık Bey, had been a non-commissioned artillery officer at Gallipoli and that he had thus grown up hearing stories about the battles there; he compared his grandfather's account to that of Torossian. In Berktay's opinion, Sarkis Torossian was 'a *Lawrence of Arabia* imitator'. His grandfather, by contrast, was 'a quiet man, not given to hyperbole; he wouldn't have dreamed of exaggerating his own role [in the campaign]'.[15] Thus, Berktay's chief complaint about Torossian's memoirs is that 'the recollections of relatives (not only Torossian's, but even my grandfather's) *cannot be seen as history*'.[16] From this vantage point, Berktay holds Torossian's recollections about Gallipoli up to a 'truth test' and states that they fall short, in the following ways:

1) Torossian says that he was made a commander of the *Ertuğrul* Battery immediately after graduating from the Ottoman Military Academy. This is impossible, because only first lieutenants or captains can be commanders of batteries.[17]
2) Torossian claims that a British battleship was sunk by fire from his own battery on 19 February [1915]. This, too, is impossible, because no warships sank on 19 February; in fact, there was not even a sea battle on that day, only a probing action and a few ships saw minor damage.
3) Likewise, Torossian states that British warships were sunk from artillery fire on 18 March 1915. This is also incorrect, because the three ships that sank on that day did so after hitting sea mines.[18]
4) Torossian confuses the names of the British and French ships involved in the battle and claims that certain ships sank when they did not. He refers to *Alçı Tepe* hill as *Aşçı Tepe*. He claims that, while he was at the *Ertuğrul* Battery he went over to *Aşçı Tepe* to conduct artillery sighting/range finding for the artillery; this is not possible either, because the distance between the different places under discussion is well over an hour's walk.

Listing these and other similar notes, Berktay concludes that Torossian's book is actually 'copied from other, published sources'. According to this Sabancı

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professor, Torossian '[did not] read closely enough the printed sources that appeared in the 1940s', and for this reason he makes errors 'while hastily copying down different elements (that correspond to New York City street names that can be found in any [New York] telephone book), errors such as fundamental mistakes in defensive measures, artillery caliber and ranges, and the names of the different batteries'.[19] The book, Berktay concludes, is actually the product of Torossian's fantasies, not his military service,[20] and can therefore not be used as a serious source for historians.

In fact, some of the factual errors that Halil Berktay listed were mentioned by Ayhan Aktar in his 80-page preface to the book. For example, there were in fact no ships sunk on 19 February. However, the claim that boats had been sunk by cannon fire on 18 March 1915, which Halil Berktay points to as a serious error, is a very interesting example of the subject of our discussion, namely the relationship between memoir and reality. Indeed, until recently the historical account about the boats that sank on 18 March ascribed them to mines rather than cannon fire. For this reason, one could claim that Torossian had made a factual error in this account. However, newly revealed research on the subject shows that the situation is not quite so clear. Some newly published memoirs of officers who were in the battle of Gallipoli reveal that high-ranking officers of the day believed that the boats had been sunk due to cannon fire and they had prepared military reports to this effect. The story about the boats sinking after colliding with mines, rather than being struck by shells, became the official historical view only after 1921. These fascinating new discoveries show us that the relation between 'historians' truth', 'truths from memoirs' and factual knowledge is more complicated than previously thought.[21]

My participation in the debate

On 23 November 2012, I became involved in the debate in the most indirect of ways. During an interview with the Istanbul-based Armenian daily *Agos*, on the occasion of the publication of my recent book on the subject of Armenian property confiscation, I criticized how the debate over Torossian's memoirs had focused solely on the military actions at Gallipoli and how totally silent the pundits were on Torossian's Armenian nationality, the destruction of his family and the Armenian Genocide.[22]

Halil Berktay penned six separate columns in response to my commentary. In them, he argued that my accusation over turning a blind eye to the Armenian question was unjustified, and that 'the entire world does not consist of the Armenian question alone. There are', he argued, 'greater, more important matters, such as the protection of scientific integrity and professional ethics and not calling a lie "the truth"'.[23] The question at hand, he continued, concerned whether Torossian's book was a work that could be used as a viable historical source, and 'in the historian's craft … the use of such a text was unacceptable'.[24]

My reply was published in *Taraf* on 24 December 2012. I acknowledged Berktay's claim that a book of memoirs certainly should be subjected to the test of

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truth, but argued that the most important aspect of Torossian's memoir was not only its potential for transforming the historical narrative on Gallipoli in Turkey, which still sees the battle as a purely 'Turkish' victory, but also its ability to reveal the historical fact of the presence of Christian soldiers within the Ottoman army. This was something that had neither been well researched nor even discussed at length. My curiosity was piqued. Why had the discussants (especially Berktay and Erdem) thus far chosen to remain silent on these two very basic questions? Why had the sensitivity displayed towards 'protecting scientific ethics and professional integrity' not extended to other, more compelling questions, like the presence of Christian soldiers in the Ottoman military and the destruction of their families?

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Hakan Erdem: Torossian's memoirs are a complete fiction

In December 2012, Hakan Erdem published a nearly four-hundred-page work on Torossian, titled *Between truth and fiction: the strange story of Torossian*. His main purpose in penning this book was 'to show why (this book) is not and *cannot* be a [valid historical] source'.[25] Erdem's book reads like a frontal assault on Torossian's memoirs. Erdem takes Berktay's method of picking apart Torossian's account of the Gallipoli campaign, and then expands it to include Macedonia, Romania, Iraq and Palestine, his conclusions being identical to those of Berktay. In Erdem's words, Torossian's war stories on different fronts 'are fictions from head to toe. The course of events on these fronts, the numbers of the military units, and the names of the commanders do not match historical realities … In fact, Torossian isn't even a graduate of the Military Academy, so he cannot have even been an artillery officer'.[26] The only facts that Erdem believes to be accurate in Torossian's memoirs are his first and last name, his birthplace, the names of his relatives and his claim that he lived in America. While he allows for the possibility that Torossian did serve with the Armenian Legion in Cilicia, he finds nothing else in the account that resembles the truth.[27] The book, in his mind 'is not a book of recollections … but fictitious text filled with scenes and vignettes' that speaks of 'places he never was or never set foot in, [and] characters who never existed'.[28] In short, the book, which is a fabrication through and through, '[did] not contain a sliver of truth that could be used in a scholarly manner by historians'.[29]

The information that Hakan Erdem presents to back up such a rounding indictment focuses on some key issues: Torossian's claim to have graduated from the Imperial Military Academy is a 'lie' because the author presented himself as a 'merchant' when entering the United States in 1920. Meanwhile, in the 1940 census he stated his career to be 'painter' and mentions the extent of his education to have been the sixth grade. It might be understandable for him to have hidden his Ottoman military service when entering the United States, but the claim of only six years of formal education some twenty years later is significant.[30]

Of course, the basic source that would prove whether Torossian was a graduate of the Imperial Military Academy is the school's own graduation rosters. Unfortunately, the rosters are not open to researchers, being held in secret somewhere in

the Archives of the Chiefs of Staff, something that few researchers question, much less criticize as reprehensible.

Erdem's second important argument against the veracity of Torossian's book is his 'discovery' that Torossian first entered the United States in 1916. In light of this assertion, Erdem argues, Torossian's 'recollections' from the year 1916 and afterwards can be said to be entirely the product of his imagination. Only with regard to certain sections dealing with his time in Cilicia, and the period immediately following, is Erdem willing to entertain the possibility that they are truthful. Erdem offers no documents that would decisively prove his claim on Torossian's entry date into the USA. In fact, the only evidence is a pencilled-in note on the line reserved for a person's name in the ship's entry forms from December 1920, the real date of Torossian's entry into the United States. Did Torossian actually enter the United States in 1916 as Erdem claims? If not, was he fighting on the Romanian front during that time as he stated in his memoirs? This question is central to whether Torossian is recounting his *own* life story or someone else's; as I will show below, Hakan Erdem is mistaken in this regard.

If we assume that Torossian's memoirs are indeed a complete fabrication, then how and why was the book written? Erdem claims to have surmised the answers. Torossian was a person who 'was a great fan of soldiering, someone who loved to read autobiographies, memoirs and such, especially those about military subjects'.[31] One thus needs to approach his book as the 'escape fantasy' of someone 'who, in the text he has written, has transformed what in reality was an unsuccessful and depressing day-to-day life in the diaspora into one of extraordinary success'. By writing this book, he may have 'hoped to attain both money and fame, and the social status that often accompany these'.[32]

As for an explanation of how Torossian wrote his memoir, Erdem simply claims he was someone 'with enough time on their hands to become a writer'.[33] After the 1929 stock market crash, he remained unemployed, and in his responses to the 1940 census he declared himself as 'having sought work for the past 6–7 years'. 'The attempt at being a writer' could be understood 'against this background'.[34] During those years of unemployment, Torossian eagerly read numerous books and wanted 'to write a best-seller by feeding the curiosity about the Orient of the average American reader and thereby rescue himself and his family from this chronically difficult state'.[35] He began writing his book in 1929 and finished it in 1947, according to Erdem.[36]

Erdem even presents a bibliography consisting of books published in the 1920s and 1930s that Torossian is likely to have read, and asserts that it is wrong to assume, for instance, that the latter would have 'written [about the Gallipoli Front] without having consulted the English-language literature of the period'. Torossian 'learned [about the history of the campaign] from his reading on subjects like unit numbers, geography, the commanders' names, and important war dates, and later wove the things he had learned into his own fantastic account'.[37]

It might be right to question whether someone with only six years of formal schooling would have the intellectual capacity to write what Torossian did. But just as important a question is the rejoinder: if Torossian did not write the book,

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then who did? I learned the answer in my interview with his granddaughter Louise Schreiber that it was not actually Torossian who wrote the book. Rather, he recounted his recollections in Armenian to someone else who translated them into English, and the writing of the work was actually completed in 1929.[38] In other words, there is no possibility whatsoever of Torossian having seen—much less read—the works mentioned by Erdem. If such is the case, there is another simple explanation for the similarity between Torossian's recollections and the contents of the books on Erdem's list: most likely, Torossian actually spent time on these various military fronts. By saying that one can possess this information only by reading these books, Erdem has in a way also acknowledged the general authenticity of Torossian's memoirs.

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Erdem's book: great interest and big problems

Hakan Erdem's book was met with great interest and general approval when it first appeared, despite its significant errors, which space prevents me from discussing in detail here. The work received broad coverage in the Turkish press and Erdem himself was frequently interviewed.[39] The daily *Hürriyet* led with coverage of the Torossian debate,[40] and one columnist claimed that 'Hakan Erdem's work [needed] to [be translated and] published in the [other] languages and thereby be brought to the attention of historians around the world'.[41]

It is clear that the main concern of people who praised Erdem's book was how it related to the Armenian Genocide, even if such concern was never overtly expressed. Erdem's book was seen as yet more proof of the unsoundness of claims regarding the genocide. According to these individuals, in the past, those wishing to prove the truth of the Armenian Genocide have frequently resorted to a policy of 'document fabrication'. The examples propounded are the Aram Andonian papers (the Talat Pasha telegrams), first published in 1919, or US Ambassador Morgenthau's memoirs of his Istanbul years, both of which have been declared phony. Now Hakan Erdem had supposedly proven that the Torossian memoirs and the alleged documents that are found in it were yet another attempt to provide spurious 'evidence' 'proving' the genocide.[42] I was also accused in the press of being an '*intellectuel engagé*' for having argued that Torossian's work could not be debated without first knowing and understanding the context of the Armenian Genocide.[43]

The lack of context for the debate was so great that in his book Erdem used the most disparaging language and a version of the Turkish past tense that denotes 'reported past', as if he was telling a fairy tale to a child, trying to dismiss the story of Torossian's sister and asserting that there was no proof 'regarding the fact that his parents reportedly had lost their lives in the events of 1915'.[44] Disparaging and dismissive language predominates throughout Erdem's book. The fact that both its language and the book were met with uncritical enthusiasm by a broad swathe of Turkish society highlights another sad truth over how both Turkish public opinion and the Turkish academic world are unfamiliar with the

subjects of large-scale massacres and the literature of survivors retelling their own experiences.

Consider an example of how far this alienation and 'contextual amnesia' regarding the genocide has gone in the Torossian debate. The most compelling evidence that Hakan Erdem produced regarding the alleged falsity of Torossian's memoirs is his 'discovery' that Torossian first went to America in 1916. To be able to accept Erdem's claim at face value, one has to believe that an Armenian subject of the Ottoman Empire could obtain a valid passport in 1916 and, equipped with this new passport, leave the country through normal channels and then travel to America via Europe. However, in 1915, all Armenians were forbidden from entering or leaving the country and it thus would have been impossible for Torossian to leave. Even those Armenians who were American citizens possessing travel documents were forbidden to leave the empire and were instead subjected to deportation. This simple fact seems to have been entirely overlooked over the course of the debate.

There is another dimension to this 'detachment' from the genocide that is noteworthy. Throughout the Torossian debate, a series of stereotypical judgements were made about life in the Armenian diaspora. Without anyone researching to test their truthfulness, claims such as stating that Torossian 'could not tell his stories of war and heroism' among fellow Armenians because he had served as an officer in the Ottoman army were offered up without verification. He also supposedly suffered a 'harsh reaction from the Armenian diaspora community' for his service, and nationalist circles within the diaspora attempted to suppress his memoirs because of his service as an Armenian officer in the Ottoman [Turkish] army. 'Torossian's recollections [were met] with silence', and so on and so forth.[45]

Torossian's granddaughter: a new dimension to the debate

I was able to locate Torossian's granddaughter in Pennsylvania without too much difficulty, and met with her to discuss her grandfather. The interview and the documents she provided steered the Torossian debate on an entirely different course.[46] Halil Berktay and Hakan Erdem's claim that Torossian was a keen reader of war histories and had written a fantasy novel posing as an autobiography, after conducting painstaking background research, was completely baseless. Instead, we have a family drama of a genocide survivor who was forced to leave his country and who suffered as a result of the traumas he had experienced, and faced challenges trying to earn a living. What I learned is as follows.

Torossian suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), especially anger management problems, because of his experiences and was unable to hold down any job for long. His family experienced great hardships trying to get by and one of his children had to leave school to contribute financially to the family's support.

He was known in Armenian circles as 'Captain Torossian' and never hid anything that he had experienced during the war. He spoke at length about his experiences and frequently told others—his children in particular—his 'war stories'.

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He dictated his book in Armenian, and an Armenian woman who spoke English later transcribed it into English. The book was completed in 1929 and deposited with the US Library of Congress on 31 October of that year. Torossian personally drew the maps contained in the book.

According to the agreement he reached with the publishing house, he would pay $1,650 to have the book published; he subsequently paid an additional $300 to purchase a number of copies of the published work. In other words, this was not a man who wrote for material gain; instead, we are speaking about a person who paid out of his own pocket what would be the rough equivalent of $20,000 today to have his own book published so that his experiences could be shared with others.

The book received an inordinate amount of attention within Armenian circles. Publication advertisements, as well as several book reviews and an interview with Torossian, appeared in English and Armenian-language papers such as *Hairenik, Baikar, Mirror Spectator and Groong*. Laudatory reviews of Torossian's memoirs appeared in *Mirror Spectator*, the official organ of the Ramgavar organization, and in the Tashnak daily *Hairenik*. The latter also devoted space to an interview with 'Captain Torossian', whom it described in the article title as 'an extraordinary man'.[47] In other words, all of the negative claims in the debate in Turkey about Torossian and the Armenian diaspora, particularly those in Hakan Erdem's book, are without foundation.

Torossian (and later his granddaughter) possessed two certificates of commendation bearing the official seal of the Ottoman 21st Army Corps Command, one of which was signed by the minister of war, Enver Pasha, the other for his service on the Romanian front.

A grandchild cannot be a valid witness for their grandparent's experiences

Based on what was recounted by Torossian's granddaughter Louise Schreiber, the debate on the authenticity of the memoirs should have come to end. We had to accept that he had written his own life story, albeit with some exaggerations. Alas, that did not occur.

Halil Berktay and fellow Sabancı University Professor Cemil Koçak dismissed Louise Schreiber's account, asserting that it could not be taken seriously. In Berktay's opinion, 'the testimony of one generation [transmitted] two generations later' was impossible. 'If, in regard to some historical events, a person writes something down, the witness to their truth or falseness can come from [the corroboration or refutation of] their peers'. He calls Louise Schreiber's testimony 'a comical situation … to appeal to a granddaughter who never met her grandfather, who was born in the year in which he passed … as proof of the truth of Torossian's writings'. Berktay called this a disastrous attempt at writing history.[48] Cemil Koçak made similar criticisms: 'the seeking out and locating of Torossian's granddaughter against the backdrop of the debate over his memoirs in order to get her to vouch for [her grandfather's] memoirs and to think that, by doing so, one can arrive at even a sliver of historical truth is simply ridiculous'.[49]

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The documents are fakes

The debate did not remain limited to Louise Schreiber's reliability. A more serious debate broke out on authenticity. The two Ottoman documents that Torossian had saved and that had been passed down to his granddaughter have been judged to be forgeries.[50] The arguments advanced in favour of their inauthenticity were as follows:

1) The character of the handwriting in both documents is identical, as if they were written by the same hand. To have two separate documents, issued in different years and by different command centres, appear this way points to the documents being forgeries.
2) Significant spelling and writing errors appear in both documents. Edhem Eldem counts as many as twenty-five different mistakes in the two documents. In his words, 'it is not possible that a document so full of errors and written in such an amateurish manner would emerge from the Ottoman bureaucracy'. Erdem thus states that the documents 'were not authentic … it is certain beyond a shadow of a doubt'.
3) In the document from May 1917, signed by a certain Abdülkerim Pasha, the Army Corps number is given as '21st' in both the official seal and the text. However, Abdülkerim Pasha was commander of the 20th Army Corps. The inaccurate number alone is enough to prove the forged nature of the documents.
4) The written letterhead on the document allegedly signed by Enver Pasha is very thick and crude. In Erdem's opinion 'it is highly doubtful that Enver Pasha would use paper with such a crude letterhead'. There is also the strong possibility that Enver Pasha's signature is forged here as well.

The general consensus that the documents are forgeries can be interpreted in two different ways. The first of these is that document forging was and continues to be a classic strategy of the Armenians. In the words of T. Niyazi Karaca, 'in the past this type of forged document would emerge and be discredited. Doubtless, more such documents will subsequently appear, because they are an indispensable source for fictitious history'.[51] For this reason, it is necessary 'to view all of Torossian's accounts—and all memoirs—with a suspicious eye and to seriously question their truth and authenticity'.[52]

The second method of interpretation is that taken by Edhem Eldem, who emphasized two separate aspects of the affair. The first is the argument that the 'evaluating of the documents as either authentic or forgeries' is unconnected to whether the information mentioned in the documents is 'either truth or lies'; rather, these are two separate issues. 'Naturally, the first thought that comes to mind is that information contained in a forged document will not be true. But we must never forget that, while this may well be true in the majority of cases, truths may nevertheless be contained in a forged document, and falsehood contained in an authentic one'. The second aspect is the fact that, even though the documents in question may be forgeries, which would casts grave doubts on all

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of the things that Torossian says, this should not necessarily lead us to a wholesale rejection of the entire account.[53]

One could argue that a third approach to the subject is also possible. There is the chance that the documents—forged as they may be—may have been produced with the full knowledge of the commanders in question with the aim of saving Torossian's life. The question of why the commander of the 21st Army Corp would sign as the commander of the 20th still appears confusing at first glance, but at the time that the document was received from the former corps, the 20th Army Corps was in the Çukurova region and the 21st Army Corps was attached to it. Torossian was also in Çukurova the day his commendation was signed. As the person responsible for bringing these documents to the public's attention, I published two different articles (dated 22 February[54] and 4 April 2013[55]) in which I both render my opinion on the allegedly forged documents and provide new information that I obtained on Torossian's life.

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The end of the first round of the Torossian debate

In my two articles, which marked the end of the first period of the Torossian debate, I offered new information and some of my own thoughts on the subject. These can be summarized as follows.

The various official government documents that I received from Louise Schreiber, such as the sworn testimony that Sarkis Torossian gave in his application for US citizenship, the document given to him by the Department of Labor in regard to his official date of entry into the United States and various other documents, like those from the census, all clearly show that Torossian first entered the country in 1920.

In his military exemption and health report from 1942, Torossian is identified as having scars from wounds on the left side of his head. In his memoirs, Torossian describes being severely wounded on the left side of his head in November 1916 while serving on the Romanian front. This information alone is sufficient to disprove Hakan Erdem's thesis that Torossian first came to the United States in 1916. Moreover, in his book Erdem committed the serious error of publishing the military's physical exemption report for a person by the name of John Toroski, not Torossian.[56]

The debate over the Torossian documents must not be limited to 'either-or' categories of 'authentic or forged'. Assertions that Torossian had the seal, letterhead and signature of Enver Pasha produced while he was in the United States and that his principal aim was either to make money or to put on airs for his American peers are claims without basis. This could only be the product of a mindset utterly unaware of what it means to produce forged documents. Those who make this claim also have no idea about the American lives of Armenian Genocide survivors, nor do they understand the level of interest American society had towards these people, which was in fact minimal.

The forgeries were most likely done during the period when Torossian was serving in the Ottoman army and prepared with his commanders' knowledge.

Their purpose may well have been to protect Torossian from harm. Indeed, in his memoirs Torossian does mention feeling that his life was in danger and described efforts that his commanders undertook to protect him. In the military, the 'code of conduct' is very important. Officers will often do everything in their power to protect the comrades with whom they have faced death. During the Holocaust, a great number of quarter- or half-Jewish soldiers managed to survive thanks to the false information and forged documents that their own commanders provided. We can imagine that a similar situation may have occurred here.

There is no categorical difference between Torossian's memoirs and those of any other Armenians who survived the genocide. All memoirs are written for others to know what has happened in their lives. Most of these were originally recounted in Armenian and then translated into English by a relative or close acquaintance. These works are often self-published because of the difficulty many such people have in finding a publisher. Even in those instances where they are as fortunate as Torossian, as a rule the authors are expected to contribute to the publishing costs. In this type of memoir, it is quite common for facts such as dates, places and people's names and the chronology of events to be confused. Furthermore, the authors occasionally use exaggerated language. Researchers must thus approach these works with the utmost caution.

What is being debated here is not whether or not a book of memoirs can be used as a historical source. On this question we can confidently say that everyone is more or less on the same footing. There is no categorical difference here between a book of memoirs and any other historical document; both have been produced by human hands. The task of the historian is to approach a book of recollections with the same eye as they would any other historical documents. They should use them only if they are sure of the accuracy of the information contained therein.

The debate, then, is whether Torossian's account is really his own—even with its admitted exaggerations and errors—or whether was he simply writing a thoroughly fictional account, a novel based on the war stories of others that he had read. I believe Torossian was writing his own life story.

Holding memoirs up to an 'accuracy test' of absolute truth and then either retaining or discarding them based on how well they 'pass' this test is an intellectually impoverished approach. The 'truths' that can be obtained from such memoirs are not necessarily factual ones. The need to bicker about the value of memoirs in historical writing and how they are debated derives from the lack of foundational knowledge on the subject. Holocaust writings are replete with hundreds of examples on this subject. In the accounts of Auschwitz survivors, for instance, there are often a great many factual errors, but it is wrong to thus deem them fabrications and toss them aside. The reality expressed in these memoirs is not that of a single, established truth.[57]

The significance of Torossian's memoirs lies in their opening up a window into new areas yet unexamined. The presence of Christian, Jewish or Arab soldiers in the Ottoman military remains almost entirely unstudied until now.[58] Similarly, the

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fate of the families of the Christian soldiers is another still untouched subject. Torossian's memoirs can be read as a possible wedge with which we can open some of these 'closed' windows.

It is highly significant that, instead of exploring such possibilities, so many academics and scholars in Turkey would expend so much energy trying to prove Torossian's work a fabrication. This reaction needs to be addressed and seriously examined. Neither Halil Berktay and Hakan Erdem on the one side, nor the various nationalist historians on the other, have responded to the arguments I made in my articles. With these articles a stage of the Torossian debate seems to have come to an end, but they have left a number of new questions unanswered.

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A hope for the next round of debate

In 1995, Binjamin Wilkomirski published his seminal work *Fragments: memories of a wartime childhood* on his memories of his childhood, which he claimed to have spent in Auschwitz.[59] The work quickly won great praise and ended up receiving several prizes as well. However, several years later it was revealed that not only was Wilkomirski not the author's real name—it was Bruno Grojean—but he had never been in Auschwitz and was not even Jewish! Rather, he was a Swiss national who had lived a comfortable life throughout the war.

Wilkomirski was simply another conman and his fabricated memoirs were as quickly discarded as they had been earlier praised. Nevertheless, his work brought to the fore another much more complex issue. Before Wilkomirski's true identity was revealed, he was effusively thanked by 'fellow' Jews who had spent their childhood years in Nazi camps for helping to make the things that they had experienced and suffered much more comprehensible. Whether true or false, the author Wilkomirski/Grojean had provided information about the heretofore unexamined lives of Jewish children in the Holocaust, and it was precisely because of the encouragement and courage that they drew from the *imagined* account of the 'Jew' Wilkomirski that they began to write and speak about their own *actual* experiences; hence, as a result, 'children and the Holocaust' has emerged as a separate field of scholarly endeavour.

The Swiss journalist Daniel Ganzfried was the first person, in 1998, to express doubts about the authenticity of Wilkomirski's memoirs. The historian Stefan Maechler would, after extensive research, prove that Wilkomirski was a concocted name and that Grojean's work was a fabrication, but he nevertheless thanked the author for opening up a new field of research—albeit unintended and under false pretences. In Maechler's opinion, Wilkomirski 'has written a powerful book. [He] captures perfectly how no-one ever leaves the camps, even long after the war'.[60]

Unfortunately, this has been something that we have been unable to do within the framework of the Torossian debate, which has been thus far characterized by highly personal ad hominem attacks and a great deal of energy expended attempting to disprove the factual account of an Ottoman soldier's memoirs. Why have we

been unable to conduct a similarly respectful and illuminating discussion on Torossian's memoirs as was witnessed in the case of a complete fabrication like Wilkomirski's book? The reasons are worth pondering. Perhaps one reason is that the frequent divergences of memoirs from historical truths make historians profoundly uneasy. We historians must learn to read such works differently, because the broadly negative attitude with which these works tend to be approached is also a reflection of how we read the victims of these events and their experiences. To either overreact to their presence and their accounts or to studiously ignore them are signs of just how poorly we understand and acknowledge their experiences. It would seem that this explains the treatment meted out to Captain Torossian.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Endnotes

1 Captain Sarkis Torossian, *From Dardanelles to Palestine: a true story of five battlefronts of Turkey and her allies and a harem romance* (Boston: Meadow Publishers, 1947).
2 Ayhan Aktar, 'Yüzbaşı Torosyan'ın adı yok!', introduction to Yüzbaşı Sarkis Torosyan, *Çanakkale'den Filistin Cephesine*, translated from English by Gizem Şakar (Istanbul: İletişim Publications, 2012), pp. 13–93.
3 For a list of the book reviews in the media see Bülent Somay (ed.), *Tarih, otobiyografi ve hakikat, yüzbaşı Torosyan tartışması ve Türkiye'de tarihyazımı* (Istanbul: Bilgi University, 2015 forthcoming), ch. 10 [Note: in modern Turkish orthography, Armenian surnames are usually spelled –yan, not –ian.]
4 Y. Hakan Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitapçılık, 2012).
5 For a recent article on Sarkis Torossian, especially on the question of why he left the Ottoman army and joined the Arab revolt, see Joseph A. Kéchichian, 'How the Armenian Genocide forced a loyal Ottoman officer to espouse the Arab revolt', *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 2014, pp. 371–389.
6 For a list of these publications, see Ayhan Aktar, 'Yüzbaşı Torosyan'ın Hayaleti', in Somay, *Tarih*, ch. 2. One book needs to be added to Aktar's list: Kalusd Sürmenyan, *Harbiyeli bir Osmanlı Ermenisi, Mülazım-i sani Sürmeyan'ın savaş ve tehcir anıları*, trans. Yaşar Tolga Cora (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayinları, 2015).
7 See http://www.tanerakcam.com/files/2014/03/Truth_Memoires_Poster.pdf.
8 Captain Sarkis Torossian, *From Dardanelles to Palestine,* pp. 217–219.
9 Objections and critiques of this sort are available at http://www.hristiyangazete.com/2012/09/yrd-doc-dr-atabay-ve-yrd-doc-dr-sayilir-canakkaleden-filistine-kitabi-hayal-urunu/.
10 'Torosyan Savaşçıları', *Hürriyet*, 16 December 2012.
11 Berktay is known as one of the organizers of the 'Armenian Conference' that was held in Istanbul in 2005, with the aim of offering an alternative to the 'official state version' of the events of 1915. For his courageous statements on the subject of the Armenian Genocide, I place his reactions to Torossian's memoirs in a different category than those of Hakan Erdem.
12 Halil Berktay, 'Torosyan'ın kimliği açığa çıkınca, sorun halloldu mu', *Taraf*, 12 December 2012.
13 Halil Berktay, 'Walter Mitty'nin gizli hayatı', *Taraf*, 21 November 2012.
14 Halil Berktay, 'Çanakkale'de ne oldu ne olmadı', *Taraf*, 27 October 2012.
15 '*sâkin ve abartısız … bir insandı; kendi rolünü hiç büyütmeye kalkmazdı*', from Halil Berktay, 'Bilvesile, Halil Namık Bey', *Taraf*, 25 October 2012.
16 'aile anıları (Torosyan'ınkiler değil dedeminkiler gibi gerçeğe sadık bile olsalar) *tarih sayılamaz*'. Emphasis in the original. Halil Berktay, 'Çanakkale'de ne oldu ne olmadı', *Taraf*, 27 October 2012.
17 *Taraf*, 27 October 2012.
18 *Taraf*, 27 October 2012.
19 *Taraf*, 8 November 2012.
20 *Taraf*, 27 October 2012.

21 The recent publication of a diary by Dr. Behçet Sabit Erduran, who was Medical Officer at Yıldız Fort (Fort No. 9 in British war accounts), gave important insights about how the allied naval attack of 18 March had been perceived by the Ottoman officers in 1915. Dr. Erduran not only wrote his personal recollections of the war, but he also quoted extensively the official circulars coming from the high command and the war journals. It is interesting to note that on 19 March the Ottoman artillery officers were celebrating their victory and narrating how Ottoman forts had sunk the French battleship *Bouvet.* Not only Dr. Erduran's account, but daily circulars sent by Cevat Pasha who was the Commander of Fortifications quoted in his diary prove that not sea mines but Ottoman artillery was instrumental in sinking the battleship *Bouvet.* See Ayhan Aktar, 'Who sank *Bouvet* on 18 March 1915? Problems of imported historiography in Turkey', paper presented at the conference 'Prolonging war of distant lands: Gallipoli, 1915′, at Istanbul University, Department of History, 26 May 2015. I thank Ayhan Aktar for sharing his paper.
22 Taner Akçam, 'İttihatçıların başladığı işi cumhuriyet hukukla bitirdi', *Agos*, 23 November 2012.
23 Halil Berktay, 'Bu da Fazıl Say'ın "kültürel diktatörlük" özlemi', *Taraf*, 1 December 2012.
24 Halil Berktay, 'Bir metnin "iç kritiği" ne demektir?', *Taraf*, 8 December 2012.
25 'Bilim adamı yazdığının arkasında olmaz', *Zaman*, 21 December 2012.
26 Conversation between Hakan Erdem and Gülenay Börekçi, 'Torosyan'ın şaibeli hatıratı', *Haber Türk*, 23 December 2012.
27 *Haber Türk*, 23 December 2012.
28 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, pp. 261, 281.
29 Halil Berktay, 'Torosyan'ın kimliği açığa çıkınca, sorun halloldu mu', *Taraf*, 12 December 2012.
30 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, p. 291.
31 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, p. 275.
32 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, p. 349.
33 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, p. 345.
34 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, pp. 262–263.
35 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, p. 306.
36 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, pp. 262, 345.
37 Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, pp. 263–264.
38 Interview with Louise Schreiber, 'O kitapta sadece dedemin savaşta yaşadıkları var', *Radikal*, 6 January 2013; 'Sarkis dedem ve insanları", *Radikal*, 7 January 2013.
39 For example, *Zaman*, 21 December 2012; *Yeni Şafak*, 16 January 2013; *Radikal*, 18 December 2013; *Haber Türk*, 23 December 2012.
40 Şehriban Oğhan 'Torosyan Kavgası', *Hürriyet*, 16 December 2012.
41 Taha Akyol, 'Torosyan Tartışması', *Hürriyet*, 17 December 2012.
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45 For the passages in quotation marks, see Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi,* pp. 268, 349.
46 Interview with Louise Schreiber, *Radikal*, 6 January 2013 and *Radikal*, 7 January 2013.
47 See Erdem, *Gerçek ile kurmaca arasında Torosyan'ın acayip hikayesi*, for some examples: pp. 268, 270, 349.
48 Halil Berktay, 'Dedenin hayatının tanığı, torunu olabilir mi?', *Taraf*, 9 January 2013.
49 Cemil Koçak, 'Ya Sarkis Torosyan doğru söylüyorsa' [What if Sarkis Torossian is telling the truth?], *Star*, 9 February 2013.
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52 Muzaffer Albayrak, 'Serkis Torosyan'ın tasdiknâme belgesi üzerine bir inceleme'.
53 Edhem Eldem, 'Torosyan belgeleri ve sonrası', pp. 38–39.
54 Taner Akçam, 'Torosoyan tartışmaları ya da suskunluğun sessiz anlaşması', available at: http://t24.com.tr/haber/yuzbasi-torosyan-tartismalari-ya-da-suskunlugun-sessiz-anlasmasi/224224.
55 Taner Akçam, 'Torosyan tartışmaları biten nedir', available at: http://t24.com.tr/haber/torosyan-tartismalari-biten-nedir/227102.
56 In response to my assertion, Hakan Erdem accused me of using a document without citing its source, since it was not clear where I had found it. Meanwhile, Halil Berktay continued to hurl insults at me. The approach of

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Berktay, who claimed that Erdem had levelled a very grave charge against me, one from which I could not acquit myself, was to characterize my action as 'a direct and open violation of scientific ethics' (*bilim ahlâkının doğrudan ve açıkça ihlâli*) and to assert that I could be thrown out of the university at which I was employed for my behaviour, which he termed 'moral turpitude' (*ahlaki düşkünlük*). Halil Berktay, 'Hakan Erdem'den bir açıklama (ve yorumum)' [An explanation (and my commentary) from Hakan Erdem], *Taraf*, 21 March 2013. My article of 4 April 2012 was in the nature of a reply to these claims. The fact is that Hakan Erdem had not carefully read the instructions on the internet site on how to download the military record. He had inadvertently downloaded the wrong file.

57 For more detailed information on this subject, see Tom Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 284–285.

58 Additional to the sources in endnote 5, see also Ayhan Aktar, 'I. Dünya Savaşında Osmanlı ordusunda Ermeni askerler', *Toplumsal Tarih*, No. 225, March 2015, pp. 30–38.

59 Binjamin Wilkomirski, *Fragments: memories of a wartime childhood* (New York: Schocken Books, 1997).

60 Lawson, *Debates on the Holocaust*, p. 287.

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